

ADDRESS

BY

REV. JOHN FRASER,

OF KINCARDINE,

IN THE DEBATE ON

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

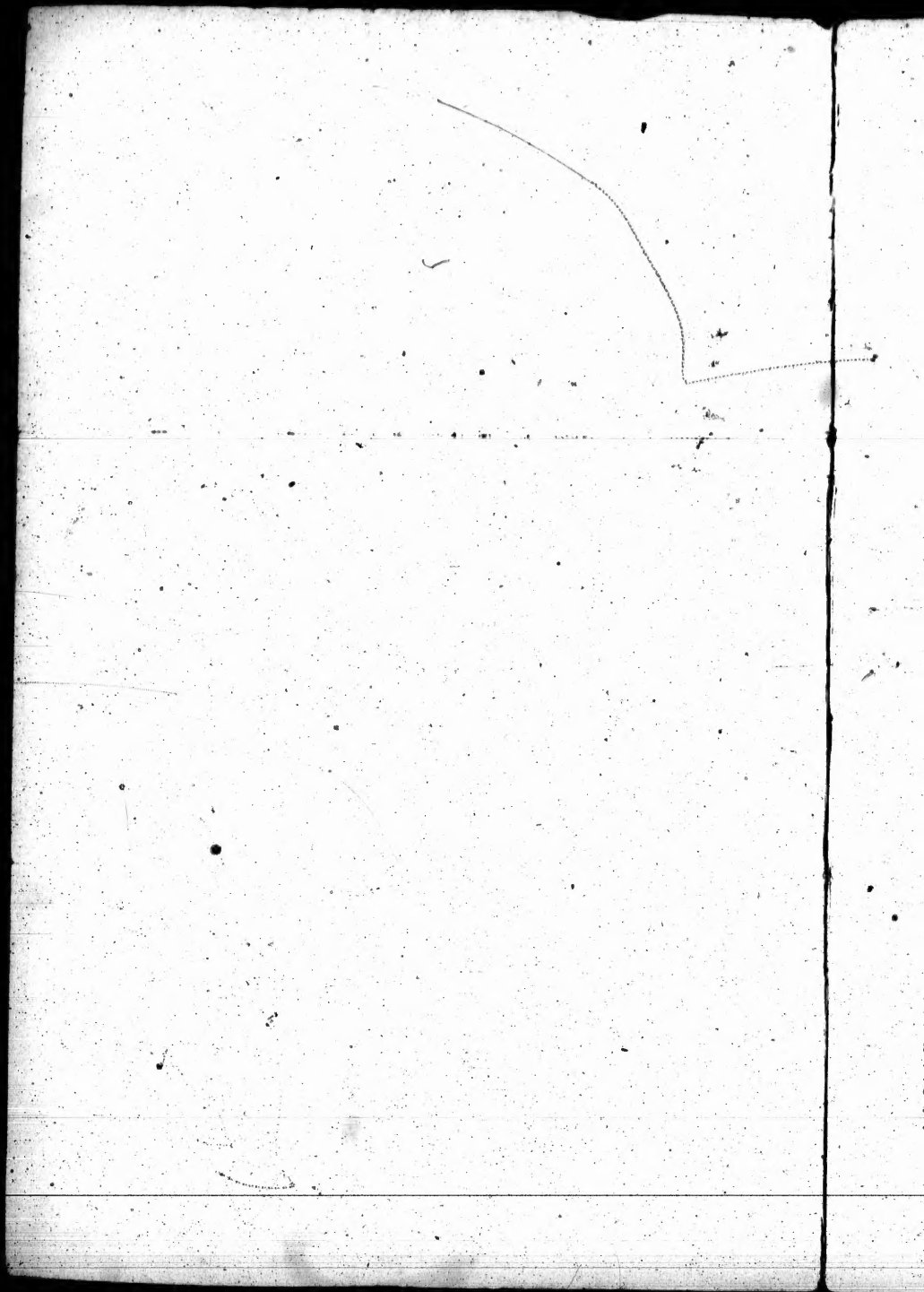
AT THE

SYNOD IN MONTREAL,

JUNE 12th, 1868.

KINCARDINE:

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INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

Moved by REV. MR. MIDDLEMISS seconded by REV. JOHN FRASER,

That the Synod having heard and considered the returns to the overture from Knox Church, Montreal, aient the use of Instrumental Music in Public Worship, find that a majority of Presbyteries, are on various grounds opposed to the granting of the prayer of the said overture, and therefore refuse to grant the same; and after full consideration of the subject, declare that the use of Instrumental Music in public worship is contrary to the principles and immemorial practice of this Church and is not to be permitted in any congregation connected therewith: And further the Synod cannot refrain from expressing regret that, notwithstanding repeated recommendations, so little interest is taken generally with a view to the improvement of the service of praise in public worship; and again urge on Kirk sessions and Congregations to consider their responsibility in the matter and to be at pains and expense with a view to the improvement of this important part of public worship.

In seconding the above motion **M. FRASER** spoke as follows:—

MODERATOR,—

Nothing is more out of place than the reflections which are cast on the Gaelic adherents of our Church. Dislike of these innovations is not a peculiarity of the Highlanders; and even if it were, is there a heart in the Free Church of Scotland that does not beat in unison with their feelings? They feel strongly. It would be a wonder—perhaps an unhappy indication—if they did not. It would be, to me at least, the sign of an altered—a declining loyalty to the Church of their fathers—of a declining piety. They love their Church; they love her with an intense, a chivalrous affection. The very rocks and waterfalls of their native glens are holy for her sake. Cradled in their northern hills, where Presbyterianism has had for ages the whole field to itself, they knew no church but one; and sad and untimely is the legislation that would sorely aggrive and alienate the hearts of that faithful and ardent people by the engraftment, in the face of their conscientious protests, of a foreign element on the service of our Sanctuaries, against which the Presbyterian sentiment of Scotland is so strong as to be proverbial.

But our Gaelic people are not alone in this feeling of adhesion to the ancestral usages of the Church. I know a congregation of Lowlanders, perhaps from the hills of Lanark or the fair banks of the Tweed, where a change in their devotional forms by the introduction of a book of hymns created a scene of unhappy violence that eventually terminated in a wide breach. Call it ignorance, if you will—or obstinacy, or bigotry, or rustic prejudice; that our people love their Church with a devotion so deep, so true, as that you are not able to bend it to an acquiescence in changes which violate the simplicity of a service enshrined by holy memories in their fondest veneration—is that a thing to be deplored—to be treated with indignation—to be held up for satire—for the taunts and acerbity of an oratorical invective? You plead for it on the ground of expediency or of taste; they resist it on the ground of conscience. What! does that provoke a smile? Do you not know that there are men in this and in other churches—men of world-wide reputation—who believe not only that the New Testament does not recognize the sound of instruments as a congenial element in the devotions of the Church, but that it virtually, or by implication, condemns it as foreign and repulsive to the genius and the bearing of an evangelical dispensation. Is there not one at least of our own Presbyteries that takes that view of the question? Is not that, too, the belief of a large minority in the Presbytery of Toronto? In the United States a conspicuous body of Presbyterians point to that very principle as lying at the base of their existence as a distinct organization. It is a fallacy to call it a prejudice. What confronts you is a sober, deliberate conviction; the protest of sincere and honest minds. There are brethren in this Court whose hearts are now aching with distressful anxiety; who feel that if the Synod will give its legislative sanction—broad and formal—to these innovations, the spheres of their usefulness will be broken up. Talk of “tyranny!”—of “cruelty!”—if the policy that you desire to press upon the Synod be adopted, who, then, will have a right to complain of “tyranny,”—of a “cruel” disregard of feelings the most sacred in the human heart?—With all your ardour for these changes, that appear to you to be so desirable on the ground, as you tell us, at once of reason, Scripture, and expediency—would you persistently demand them—would you even accept of them at such a cost?

There is danger, Sir, that the Synod may forget or underestimate the real nature of that antipathy with which our people regard this question of Instrumental Music, and that it may be tempted to shape its action as if it had to deal with only the noisy and insignificant clamours of a blind prejudice or an obstinate caprice. If there is a time when one has a right to expect that

the Church of God will cover him with the shield of her sympathy and protection, it is when conscience is forced to plead for the inviolability of its behests.

It is asked: "Why not grant this liberty to congregations that desire it?—there is no wish, and there will be no attempt, to violate the rights of others or molest them in their wonted habits of devotion."—That, Sir, is not Presbyterianism; it is Congregationalism, and its radical principle of disintegration. Born and bred in a Presbyterian climate—its bracing vigor in their hearts—the unity of the Church is with our people a fundamental idea! That sentiment, Sir, is strength. Foster it. It is a pledge to our Church of power—of perpetuity. I do not mean to say that no act is constitutional unless the Church be of one mind; but I do mean to say, that a practice at one end of the church, with Synodical sanction to confirm it, against which there is a cry of conscience from the other, is a state of things utterly destructive of that unity which constitutes the genius and the glory of our Presbyterian system.

There are some who plead for it on the ground that it contributes to "edification." Sir, if I were able to see any truth in that argument, the Synod should not hear a word from me, nor from this side of the house, in a tone of remonstrance or of opposition. Can you show that instrumental music was an element in the service of the primitive church? Can you show that for the first three centuries there was any other form of praise than the simple melody of the human voice? Did the Church then feel that there was a check on the ardour and the elevation of her devotional spirit in the meagreness of her psalmody—in its lack of orchestral variety and grandeur? Of course you think there must have been—you who plead for it as the means of a loftier spirituality—a more ecstatic adoration;—and yet when was there such a faith, a love, a beauty of holiness so pure, illustrious, divine; and when were the glories of a risen Saviour sung in a more felicitous accordance with His own description of what constitutes the life and the true magnificence of an acceptable worship? How much better to put it, and be content to leave it, on the only ground on which it can reasonably bear to be put:—the ground simply of "taste"—of "expediency"—of "accommodation?" I here declare that it belongs wholly to the region, not of inviolable principle or of conscience, but of mere sentiment. I solemnly proclaim it—that the question which now agitates the Synod, and hangs over us like a cloud, is one to which the Church of the living God owes absolutely nothing for the fructification of her inner life. It has been made to appear, however, in a way that astonished the Church,

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that an organ is needed for its edifying properties in the congregation of Knox Church, Montreal. Liberality is a Christian grace. Love to Christ has been in all ages regarded as the grand—the sanctified motive of a true Christian munificence. The gifts of those who “cast of their abundance” into the treasury of the temple were stigmatized by the Great Searcher of hearts as unworthy of His Name and Kingdom, because they flowed from some other feeling, whatever that may have been, than the high principle of love. And I hope, Sir, that it will never again be proclaimed in this Synod that the liberality of a congregation in aid of our evangelistic institutions shall be regulated by no higher consideration than the amount of latitude which may be afforded them in the matter of Instrumental Music!*

It was argued on behalf of these changes at the last Synod in Toronto that in some places at least they are indispensable to the existence of congregations—that without the magic power of instrumental music the great body of our young people will fall away from the communion of the Church, attracted by the popular and splendid entertainments of other denominations. This, Sir, if true, would be a dark prospect. But I do not believe it. What! do they mean to assure us that the pulpits of our Church are so deficient in the great attributes of power and attractiveness as that we must be driven to the fantastic expedient of an organ and orchestra in order to keep our people in steady adherence to our cause? Does Brownlow North need the echoing harmonies of pipe or chord when he draws out to heaths and mountain hollows the tens of thousands that hang on the Gospel simplicity of his ministrations? Was it an organ that filled the aisles of St. Peter's Church, Dundee—or was it the glowing earnestness of Robert Murray McCheyne? If we would have a devoted people—a happy, living, and vigorous Church, we must depend on an influence of another character than the fine music or the flashing oratory that regales the fancy, and wakes up the thrill of a fleeting emotional transport; we must rely on the purity of her doctrines, the efficacy of her ordinances, and the apostolic fervour of her pastors; on the descent of a “power” and a “glory” that would make her tabernacles the birth-place of souls. It is then that our people would love our Zion, as the “perfection of beauty”—their “chiefest joy”—their “resting place”—their “home”.

*“WHATEVER they had promised to pay, he knew they were honorable enough to pay the last cent of it, whether the organ was allowed or disallowed. This he would say, however, that had they not been subjected to such annoyances, instead of their subscription being \$2,000, it would have been nearer \$5,000.—*Mr. McGibbon's Speech in Synod at Toronto, 1867.*”

it is also pleaded for as a means of improving our psalmody. That, Sir, is a subject which calls for the earnest consideration of the Synod. I am sorry to say that my own experience is not such as that I can speak in laudatory terms of our skill or reputation as a Church in the service of praise. Allow me, however, to say, that although I do not often enjoy the opportunity of hearing that part of divine worship with the elegancies of art to adorn it, it is my frequent privilege to listen to and to join in the gushings of a simple and pathetic melody that comes in the fullness of a native utterance from hearts melted by the power of a Saviour's love. We are not in a mind to obstruct the Synod in any practicable or judicious measures which it may be led to adopt with a view to raise our psalmody to as high a pitch as possible of attractive excellence and power. We are not insensible to the charms or the dignity of a skillful execution in the music of the Lord's house. But do you mean to assert that there is no hope for our psalmody unless we have recourse to instrumental aid? Then let me point to congregations in the great Scottish capitals, where the singing is superb, and the whole assembly is one vast choir. What would they think of us in Edinburgh—what would it suggest—to hear it urged in this Synod as an argument of mightiest force that without the aid and the fascinations of instrumental music our psalmody will dwindle into an insipid and impracticable service, our souls spiritually suffer, and our congregations dissolve like the mist!

I hope, Sir, that the Synod will shrink from giving forth on this subject a deliverance of a nature or in a shape to chill the affections of so large a portion of our people. How greatly that is to be deprecated. A spirit of intestine disaffection spreading like a plague in the midst of us, would tell more fatally on the vital energies of the Church than even the crashing shock of a disruption. Liberality would be dried up; our pastors be disabled; their flocks disorganized; their means of subsistence, already in too many cases so scanty and precarious, be still further abridged,—perhaps totally cut off; our Missionary Schemes and Colleges would pine of atrophy, and the spirit of prayer for a blessing on word and ordinances be depressed or silenced! Are these only dreams? distorted fancies? baseless alarms? Is it my object only to intimidate—to appal you with spectral images of terror? Would to God, Sir, that I could persuade myself that there is nothing of stern reality in the picture. The discontent with which the late Union was regarded is not yet so far conciliated or allayed as that you can, without serious risk, advance by steps so hasty and adventurous in the exciting work of innovation. There is a latent disquietude arising out of an impression, vague it may be, but persistent, that the articles on which that Union was effected are

not after all of such a quality as to protect and to perpetuate free from mutilation the distinctive principles of the Church of our fathers. It is a time for prudence—for hesitancy. Do not agitate those cooling elements, or fan them into outbreak. Look at the enthusiasm with which the Free Church of Scotland has thrown herself into negotiations for a Union with a sister body of Presbyterians; and yet the leading advocates of that alliance, for all the belief they entertain of its legitimacy and of its rich advantages to the Church and to the country, are in a mind not to press it—are resolved with a magnanimity that we are forced to admire, and that we ought to emulate, to forego the whole of its anticipated blessings, to sacrifice their own most cherished aspirations, rather than wound or outrage convictions that, however they may lament their existence, they know, nevertheless, to be seated in a very tender sensibility—to be conscientious, genuine, sincere.

At the time of Dr. Chalmers's death there appeared in the *Edinburgh Witness* an obituary notice of that great man; the following extract seems to call for serious consideration at a crisis like this:—"With greatly more energy than any other man of the body, he had also greatly more of the *vis inertiae* that withstands the influence of a current from without. He formed, in one important phase of his character, a great immovable anchor, that moored the vessel of the Free Church right over the Disruption; and, now that he is gone, there must be sedulous watch kept, lest, yielding to the insidious tendencies of the time, we drift away." These are the words in which the Church was admonished to be on her guard, now that her robust pilot was gone, against that strong current of change and sensational novelty which constitute so marked a feature of the restive spirit of the age in which we live.

Sir, I would pour out my prayer for the peace of the Church—that God would be gracious to us, and quell the agitation that afflicts us. We are called to do a great work—to lay the foundations on this vast territory of the Christianity of future ages; and we cannot do it but in the power—the quiescence of fraternal unity. Our Church is feeble; it is the period of her infancy; why shatter her strength with questions that "gender strife rather than godly edifying?" The sound of an iron tool was not heard when Solomon's builders were busy on the temple; it rose amid silent and harmonious activity—a dwelling place on earth for the God of Peace.

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“All wise and sober persons,” observes Bishop Taylor, “do find fault when the psalmody which is recommended by the practice of Christ and his apostles does sensibly pass further into art than into religion, and serves pleasure more than devotion; when it recedes from that native simplicity and gravity which served the affections and holy aspirations of so many ages of the Church; when it is so conducted that it shall not be for edification; that is, when it is so made accurate and curious that none can join in but musicians; and they also are not so recitative, they do not sing and express the words so plainly, that they which hear do understand; for by this means the greatest benefit and use of edification is lost.”

Smith-wright. James
Em

Mr William Lewis



